

# Methodological challenges: Children as a focus of research

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This article is based on my fieldwork experiences spring/summer 1999 in an American elementary school located in the state of Maine. The town the school is based in is very small (4000 inhabitants), and is the fifth busiest port of entry to the United States on the Canadian border. The school itself consists of approximately 300 pupils, with classes ranging from kindergarten to the fifth grade level. I originally arrived at this remote rural town with a wish to explore various aspects of how the school children related to information technology (IT), and the place this technology had in the local social environment. This was possible, as the school had recently purchased a number of new computers, with the help of money that was raised through a local fundraiser. However, during the ongoing development of my fieldwork and in the current writing of my thesis, my research problem has become much more focused, and revolves around the question: *Do wider, Western societal discourses determine how the elementary school members think of, relate to and use information technology?* How do these “global” discourses relate to the more local aspects of their lives? In answering these questions, it will be important to show that my informants were active agents in relation to computer technology, and the world of meaning surrounding it.

My research problem will, however, not be the topic of this article, but is useful as background information. In the following I wish to focus on some of the experiences I had during my fieldwork at the elementary school, namely the challenges I faced in having children as research subjects. Even though the children I studied were individually unique and were (are) growing up in specific social environments, I hope others conducting research involving children are able to recognize some of the issues I touch upon below.

I will start off with a brief discussion on how children have been conceptualized in anthropology, and in research that relates to my area of study. The main point of this discussion is to show that choice of method can strongly influence or support certain theoretical perspectives, in this case ideas

surrounding the concept of “the child”. Then I will describe the particular methods used during my fieldwork, and the challenges that emerged from using them with children. Thereafter I will address the issue of gaining access to children, and how I was identified by my informants. The article ends with a consideration of some important ethical questions relating to children as informants.

## **Children in anthropology**

There are a number of issues to consider when children are the focus of one’s research. A possible point of departure might be to take a short look at how children have previously been dealt with in anthropology. It is possible to argue that one of the most insightful contributions by anthropology concerning children is the view that being a “child” is not, as is often assumed, a “natural” stage in a person’s lifecycle. However, due to the fact that this insight is relatively recent, and despite the fact that the study of children is not an unknown subject in the social sciences, children have rarely been the main focus of anthropological studies. When children were a focus of research, they were most often depicted as being handed over knowledge and skills that they would need to function in society, meaning that they were in some way socially incomplete or only partially cultural. This led to a view of children as passive reproducers of culture, and their present state as children became irrelevant. This view of children, influenced by sociology and psychology, was called into question when anthropologists started challenging the notion of culture as bound and integrated wholes. By seeing cultures as dynamic and relational, Virginia Caputo argues that it is not only possible, but that we *should* see children as “[...] active agents engaged in the production and management of meaning in their own social lives.” (1995:20). Even though children do take part in the reproduction of “adult culture” through the process of socialization, they must also be viewed as producers — not only changing the wider cultures they are part of, but also creating a social world among themselves.

Choice of research method is always important, regardless of who or what one intends to study. However, the question of method should be given special consideration when conducting research involving children, as a way of countering previous conceptions of this age-group as one-dimensional and passive members of society. To be able to show how children actively contribute to the production and reproduction of the cultures they are part of; it is necessary to employ a method that captures the individual child’s perspective — i.e. their “point of views”. As Caputo (ibid.) points out, the ethnographic method of participant observation is particularly well suited to achieve an articulation of a child’s “worldview”, as it

allows one to capture aspects of their lives that are spontaneous and informal. I found this line of argument even more convincing during my own research, where my main method was participant observation. I had started off my fieldwork wanting to find out how children viewed and related to information technology, and how IT was incorporated into their social interaction. The use of this method quickly strengthened its hold as it helped me produce data that I felt shed light on these issues. I find it hard to imagine others that would have given me similar insights. I therefore agree with Caputo that participant observation is well suited to gain insight into the social worlds of children. However, it did not completely eliminate my use of other methods (e.g. interviews), as there were a number of questions that could not be answered from participant observation alone.

### **Methods in related research**

When I began my research on children and information technology, I quickly discovered that there were few extensive studies on this topic. As I write, this is still the case, although things are slowly improving. However, for the most part I must try to relate my work to research that focus on different age-groups than the ones I am interested in, and, more importantly, are rarely conducted from an anthropological perspective. This means that most of the studies regarding relationships between people and information technology have, to a large extent, used research methods that differ from methods used in anthropology. Many of the studies are conducted from a sociological and/or psychological perspective, and are based on various types of *interviews*. These range from the type of structured interviews that yield statistical results, to completely open-ended interviews in which respondents have a great amount of freedom regarding how they answer the questions asked. These studies also vary according to whether they conducted interviews face-to-face with their informants, or employed a more “impersonal” approach such as, for example, over the Internet. Interviews conducted over the Internet have become a widely discussed topic in the social sciences, especially with regards to such issues as data validity and research ethics<sup>1</sup>.

A consequence of such interview-based research is that these studies are often characterized as being not only very limited in *scope*, e.g. focusing on the use of the computer by one person and not, for example, the social dynamics that emerge between users as well as in relation to the technology, but also in *time* spent with informants. Short time spans and lack of depth seem to result in an image of children as being passive consumers of information technology; as largely without a will and conscious mind when dealing with computers. As a result, one finds that such research and the consequent dis-

courses emerging from them often will portray children as either a victim or a hero in relation to computer technology; as either being swallowed up by the negative side-effects of playing computer games or having some natural talent for “understanding” computers. Participant observation helps one avoid such “stereotyping”, and allowed me to gain a much more complex understanding of how children participate in developing the world of meaning surrounding IT.

## **My methodological choices and experienced challenges**

### **Methods**

As mentioned, the main research method I used was *participant observation*, which proved to be an excellent method for getting to know the children and teachers, while at the same time gathering the data I needed. The first two months of my fieldwork consisted of observing as many computer classes in the school library as possible — that way I was able to meet most of the school’s teachers and pupils, while at the same time obtaining an overview of social networks, interpersonal relationships and the different uses of computers. After these two months I narrowed my focus and spent most of my time comparing two specific classes. However, my research period was not only spent observing, but also participating in the daily routines of the school. Most of the time I would function as a library volunteer and as an “informal” teacher’s assistant. I found that one of the greatest advantages of participant observation was its *closeness*, allowing me to obtain intimate knowledge about the social environment at the school. The passing of time and my constant presence meant that my informants, especially the children, started taking me for granted as part of the everyday routine of the school.

In addition to participant observation, I also interviewed 30 pupils from the third and fourth grade. Their ages ranged from approximately 7 to 9 years old, and they were from the same two classes that I was comparing through participant observation. I found this necessary as I had a number of questions that could not be answered by just observing or having short informal conversations with the children. Amongst other things, I wanted to get some background information on how and if the children used computers in their spare time; to find out how it was a part of their life outside school. Therefore, some of the questions I asked concerned such background issues: Who did they use computers with, what did they use it for, did they have access to one, did they learn things about computers outside the school environment etc. I also asked questions to find out how the children thought about/perceived information technology, if they used computers to communicate with others, their future thoughts on this technology

and had them compare the medium of TV and computers.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one, with 14 prewritten questions (open answers). As I soon discovered, interviewing children presented several problems, which might lead one to question, the validity of the data obtained by this method. First of all, the children had never been in a similar situation before, so I always had to ensure them at the beginning of the interview that no one would know what they answered, and that the interview was not any kind of test. Still, many of them would remain a little nervous and “on edge”, and I would sometimes have to encourage them to answer the questions. The formality of the situation might have lead them to provide responses to my questions that they thought I wanted to hear, or that were in some way “correct”. I also found it impossible to use a tape recorder, since the children were more interested in hearing their voice on tape than on answering my questions. Further, in addition to their feeling of awkwardness toward the interview situation, there were limits to how long they managed to stay focused and interested in my questions. There were, of course, individual variations in the degree of patience they exhibited, but by the time I had reached the last question the novelty of being interviewed had worn off, and the majority felt it was time to change activities. With these problems in mind, I have chosen to view the resulting data from the interviews as a supplement to the information I obtained through participant observation. The interviews have provided me with useful background information, but my thesis is focused on the daily experiences I had with the children at the school.

This is not to say that the use of participant observation was without problems. No matter how much I was able to “fit in” the school environment, I was still encountered with the fact that children experience most of their contact with adults in subordinate positions of power (Caputo 1995). For example, my writing notes while observing them became a major concern for the children. Once, two fifth grade boys decided to go on an internet site they had explicitly been told to stay away from. A after a few minutes they realized I was watching them, and one of them asked: “Are you going to tell Mrs. Brown what we did?” Children from other classes also approached me and expressed that they were worried that I was writing “bad things” about them, and that this information would be passed on to their teachers. Since this obviously had an influence on their actions and attitudes toward me, I quickly started restricting my note taking, and would usually jot notes between classes. However, I would like to emphasize that as time passed I was able to gain a certain trust with the children; whenever I was not interacting with them they almost seemed to forget that I was there. There are two main reasons for this. First, the children quickly realized that

I was *not* discussing their behavior with teachers — they had never been disciplined as a result of actions only I had witnessed. Secondly, even though I would often help children with computer problems, I never acted fully as a “real” teacher: I did not check their homework, give them tests, tell them to be quiet etc. It therefore seems that by avoiding some of the usual “power aspects” that can be a part of child-adult interaction, I was able to reduce disturbances I might otherwise would have had on their interaction with peers.

### Gaining Access to the Children

As most people discover when starting out fieldwork, choice of method is not that important if one does not gain *access* to the people of interest to one’s research problem. When it comes to children, this can be a more strenuous process than in the case of gaining access to adult informants, since permission to conduct research must be obtained from someone other than the research subjects themselves. Further, the difficulty of gaining access depends to a large degree on the research focus, and the social environment the children are a part of. In my case, the research focus was of a relatively benign, non-controversial sort — at least in the eyes of my informants. Even though I have no doubt that this eased my access, I still had to obtain permission from the principal to conduct research at his school, and also had to get written permission from the parents of those students I wished to interview. One might therefore say that the key issue here was making sure that I had been granted access from the adults who were responsible for the children’s well-being; these adults may be termed as my “gatekeepers”.

However, even though initial access to children at the school was ensured, I soon found out that unlimited access was not to be taken for granted. I wanted to observe the kids in “non-computer” situations, to be able to gain a wider impression of how they interacted with each other and adults. In the beginning it was somewhat hard to legitimize such observations, as my surroundings had linked me with the theme “children and information technology”. But eventually, after we had become familiar to each other, it became easier for me to “tag along” different classes without anyone taking particular notice. However, access to the children outside the school environment was a different matter. Even though participant observation is suitable for studying young children, it can be difficult to spend extended periods of time with them since adults (Caputo 1995). set restrictions on their time. This was the case during my fieldwork, and I found it extremely difficult to cross the line between the “public” world of the elementary school to the “private” domain of individual children’s households. The most important reason for this is that the issue of “privacy” is an important one in the western industrialized world, and this is especially

the case in the United States (Newman 1988). Privacy of home and family is a value widely respected, also by myself as I grew up with such values. This means that I found it very hard to make myself cross this boundary, and the few times I did it was usually met with a hesitant and skeptical response. Also, it was first toward the end of my fieldwork that I felt that I was really getting to know students and teachers. Given more time, I am quite sure that such a developing familiarity would have made it much easier for me to gain access to some of the students households.

### **Acceptance = Identities**

I found that the quality and type of data I was able to obtain was greatly dependent on the children accepting me; a process that was closely connected to how I was *identified*. Before meeting the teachers I had sent out a letter of presentation to them, to explain who I was and what the purpose of my stay would be. Therefore, when meeting them, I assume they identified me as “The graduate student from Norway”. Most seemed very interested in my research, and also in learning about Norway. However, the fact that I was a student of anthropology faded into the background, and was never the topic of our conversations.

The children’s identification of me was somewhat different, as they had not had any prior notice of who I was. Only one teacher introduced me formally to her class, while the rest had to figure out on their own who I was and what I was doing there. Their main solution to this problem was to place me in the school’s previously existing social networks, based on the various tasks I performed. Therefore, one of the ways I was identified was as a “library volunteer”. The school’s library was driven by volunteers; mostly parents and retired teachers. They took care of checking out and shelving books, and kept the library in general order. But due to the fact that they always had a shortage of volunteers, it did not take long before I was asked if I would mind helping out. However, I was also identified as a “teacher assistant”. I quickly fell into the habit of helping the children when they were using the computers, especially in those classes where the teacher was a “computer illiterate”. This would occur by the children asking me for help if their teacher was not available or unable to help, or by my offering them help when they were stuck. Also, the fact that I was female (as most of the teachers were) and not much younger than the youngest teacher, meant that in many ways (at least initially) I fit with the previous image the children had of “a teacher”. I also believe that the fact that I spoke English fluently helped them place me in their social environment. Thus, it seems that the children had a very strong need to identify me in some way that would allow me to fit into their already pre-existing social universe. However, when

I was not helping them I would just sit nearby in the library observing them, an act that obviously did not fit with my other “ascribed identities”. It usually would not take long before a student’s curiosity would get the best of him/her, and they would come and ask me straight out who I was, and what I was doing there. An example from one of my early encounters with some fifth graders:

One of the fifth graders come up to where I am sitting in the library and asks: “Are you a teacher?” and I answer no. The next question is “Are you training to be a teacher?” Since the answer to this question is also no, the immediate follow-up is “Then what ‘ya doing here?” I respond that I am here to watch them use computers. Their reaction is that it sounds “boring”, and they continue with other questions, such as: “Where are you from?” “How old are you?” etc. I tell them that I am from Norway in Europe, and I ask them if they know the family I am staying with. The small group of children surrounding me enthusiastically say they do, and for the remaining part of library class I am termed as the girl from Norway, related to so-and-so.

(Excerpt from fieldnotes)

Many of the children could not understand why I would be bothered to do something as boring as watching them use computers, and thought it was some type of homework that I had to do. This resulted in a number of children feeling sorry for me, and they would try to “make me feel better” by involving me in several of their activities, such as reading a book, playing a game on a computer or drawing a picture.

After a few weeks of fieldwork the library had become my “second home”, and it seemed as if both the children and teachers took my presence for granted—I became part of the furnishing, so to speak. One might therefore say that my school “identities” was closely associated with the fact that I spent most of my time within the physical boundaries of the library. This became clear to me one day when I was walking around the corridors of the school. There I met a boy who was going in the opposite direction, and he gave me a thoughtful look. After passing me he turned around and asked: “Aren’t you supposed to be in the library?”

Thus, who I “was” (and how I was accepted) for the children can be said to be the result of how I presented myself to my surroundings, and how they viewed me on the basis of my actions, my (physical) locations and my previous relations with a few local residents.



## Ethical considerations

Last but not least, there are two important ethical issues to consider when studying children: that of *consent* and anonymity. The issue of consent has to do with the fact that children are (as a rule) legally and morally viewed as incapable of making important decisions for themselves. In general, most societies have therefore placed the responsibility of making decisions on behalf of a child on specific caretakers (usually the parents). This means that when one wishes to conduct research focusing on children, one must usually obtain permission to do this from *someone other than the research subjects themselves*. Legally and practically things might be in order for one's research by obtaining such permission, but it still might be a problem for the researcher personally. After all, are children ever asked if they *want* to participate? But then again, if they are asked, do they really understand what the research is about? I would assume that the strength of this dilemma varies according to the type and nature of the proposed research (e.g. controversial subject), but that it in any case would be of importance for how the researcher related to her/his child informant. During my fieldwork, the pondering over these questions resulted in an attempt to be very explicit with the children why I was with them at the school, and what I was doing there. The reasoning behind this was that since the children "involuntarily" were subjected to my research, I was at least going to be completely honest with them about my intentions. I must add however, that I am not sure how many of the children really understood what I was doing, or if they even remembered it when I interacted with them as something other than "anthropology student".

Related to the subject of consent, is the issue of *anonymity*. The process of concealing the identity of informants in the end product of one's research has become an unwritten rule in the social sciences. This is usually done even if an informant has expressed a wish to see his or her name in print, or at least has said that they do not mind either way. The reasoning behind the concept of anonymity in research has to do with a wish to protect one's research subjects, especially since they have been willing to contribute information that has enabled one to conduct research in the first place. The question is then, what are we protecting them from? In many cases, the research subject is so controversial that it becomes necessary for the well-being of the informant. However, the issue that applies for all social science studies is *unintended consequences*. There is always the risk that an informant has not fully understood what the research is about, and therefore has not been able to foresee the consequences of the resulting study. Further, research might always have consequences that neither informants or researchers were able to predict, as one is never fully in control as to how others use the results of one's work.

I would argue that the issue of anonymity is even more important when the informants concerned are children, since they usually are not given the choice of whether or not they want to participate in a study. Since the child itself has not given consent to its participation, it becomes even more important to shield them from eventual unintended consequences.

Finally, the question is how and to what degree should one change the individual characteristics of one's informants in the resulting published research. I find that in my case this is a difficult problem, as my fieldwork took place in a small town where "everyone knows everyone", and almost everyone (probably) was aware of my presence at the elementary school. In this case the solution seems to be to try to make my informants unrecognizable at least to outsiders of the town, as there are limits to how many of an informant's characteristics one can alter and erase before it affects the validity of one's research.

## Summary

In this article, I have briefly touched upon several aspects of the methodological process in relation to a particular group of informants, namely children. Based on my own fieldwork experiences, I have attempted to make three main points. The first of these is that choice of a particular method can undermine or support certain theoretical perspectives. In my case, participant observation was well suited to obtain empirical data that would help portray children as active members of their social environment, rather than passive subjects to be "socialized" and molded into young adults. Secondly, related to the first point, is that children as informants pose particular challenges to the researcher, in addition to the already inherent advantages and disadvantages of different methods. For example, one should keep in mind that interviews may not be the best way to obtain information from young children, as they can be easily distracted and/or have limited attention spans. Last but not least, if children are a focus of one's research there are certain ethical questions that should be asked and answered, so as to ensure the validity of the resulting research, and as a sign of respect toward the informants themselves.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Two recent studies using interviews conducted on the internet are Sherry Turkle's "Life on the Screen" (1995) and Don Tapscott's "Growing up Digital" (1998).

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